

Leon Redbone, eccentric musician who seemed to inhabit an earlier time, dies at 69

By [Matt Schudel](#)

May 30

Leon Redbone, a musician of inscrutable individuality who seemed to inhabit the past in his concerts and recordings, playing and singing early jazz and blues as if he had strolled straight out of the 1920s, died May 30 at a care facility near his home in New Hope, Pa. A family statement whimsically noted that he “crossed the delta for that beautiful shore at the age of 127.”

In fact, Mr. Redbone was 69, said his wife and manager, Beryl Handler. He had complications from dementia.

Mr. Redbone first gained notice in Toronto in the early 1970s, seemingly emerging from nowhere as a self-created performer who defied time, popular tastes and musical trends to delve into the past with a style all his own.

He played acoustic guitar and sang in a deep, guttural voice that seemed to have come from a traveling medicine show, vaudeville or the back alleys of old New Orleans. Always appearing in a coat and tie, hat and dark glasses, he seemed at first glance to be something of a costumed caricature.

“I dress this way when I walk out onstage to play guitar and when I walk out into the street,” he told the Kirkland (Wash.) Reporter in 2011. “I dressed this way when I was a child, assuming I was a child.”

He was an eccentric blend of antiquarian, actor, singer, musician and performance artist — with a strong element of Marxian (as in Groucho) absurdity. Mr. Redbone once pulled a tomato from his handkerchief and placed it on a stool beside him, played his songs, then wrapped it up and left the stage.

He entertained his listeners with hoary jokes, paddled his guitar as if rowing a boat for one of his signature songs, “[Up a Lazy River](#).” His banter with the audience could be zany or head-scratchingly odd.

“If you know the words,” he might say, “please hum along.”

He would blow bubbles onstage, shine a flashlight into the audience or a pull out a camera to take photographs of his fans.

“Even if you have trouble finding a word to describe what he does,” Washington Post music critic Joseph McLellan wrote in 1975, “he does it beautifully. And he convinces you that it is worth doing.”

For years, there was speculation that “Leon Redbone” was the invention of comedian Andy Kaufman, musical iconoclast Frank Zappa — whom he strongly resembled, with his bushy mustache and soul patch — or even Bob Dylan in disguise.

It was Dylan who brought Mr. Redbone widespread recognition after a 1972 performance at Canada's Mariposa Folk Festival.

"Leon interests me," Dylan later told Rolling Stone magazine. He praised Mr. Redbone's remarkable command of early musical styles, switching from ragtime to the country music of Jimmie Rodgers, the "Singing Brakeman," to the jazz of Fats Waller and the blues of Robert Johnson and Blind Blake. His repertoire included such tunes as ["Diddy Wah Diddy," "Shine On, Harvest Moon"](#) and ["Polly Wolly Doodle."](#)

But Mr. Redbone was an enigma even to Dylan. "I've heard he's anywhere from 25 to 60," Dylan said. "I've been this close" — he held his hands 18 inches apart — "and I can't tell, but you gotta see him."

Other musical admirers included Tom Waits, John Prine, Jack White and Bonnie Raitt, who sometimes toured with Mr. Redbone.

"I spent an afternoon with him in a hotel room," Raitt told Rolling Stone, "and I was wondering when he was going to become normal. He never did."

Throughout his career, whether in concert, in interviews or on television, Mr. Redbone never broke character. When it came to his music and his persona, he was dead earnest.

In 1976, Mr. Redbone performed two times on "Saturday Night Live," which led to sales of 200,000 copies of his debut 1975 album, "On the Track." His only song to reach Billboard's Hot 100 was ["Seduced"](#) (1981), a modern song by Gary Tigerman, with saucy lyrics in an old-fashioned musical framework.

Mr. Redbone made frequent appearances on Johnny Carson's ["Tonight Show"](#) and other television programs and sang the theme song of the 1980s sitcom ["Mr. Belvedere."](#) He was featured in several popular advertising campaigns, including for [Budweiser](#) beer.

More recently, Mr. Redbone was the voice and visual inspiration of "Leon the Snowman" in the 2003 Will Ferrell holiday movie, "Elf." ("Oh, by the way," he tells Ferrell's character, "don't eat the yellow snow.") Over the film's final credits, Mr. Redbone sings a duet of ["Baby, It's Cold Outside"](#) with the film's co-star, Zooey Deschanel.

He released 16 albums over the years, including a well-received [Christmas album](#).

"I think music is, in effect, a time machine," he told the Associated Press in 1990. "It takes you to different places, places you'd want to go. It can take you to a past you're not familiar with. I can't figure why people would want to go the places they're singing about these days."

Mr. Redbone studiously concealed his past, including his name at birth and his age. In his early biographical materials, he said his father was violinist Niccolo Paganini and his mother was the opera singer Jenny Lind — both of whom died in the 19th century.

He sometimes claimed to have been born in Manhattan on the day of the 1929 stock market crash. Other accounts suggested he was from Shreveport, La., New Orleans, Cleveland, somewhere in Canada — or maybe India.

"Perhaps to some I am a very mysterious fellow," he told The Washington Post in 1978.

His wife confirmed that Mr. Redbone was born Aug. 26, 1949, in Cyprus. In the 1980s, a Canadian journalist determined, from legal documents recording a name change, that Mr. Redbone's name at birth was Dickran Gobalian.

His background remained largely unknown until March of this year, when journalist Megan Pugh published an extensive article in the Oxford American. Mr. Redbone's father was an Armenian orphan, and his parents lived in Jerusalem before moving to Nicosia, Cyprus, shortly before their son's birth.

They moved to London in the early 1960s, then to Toronto by 1965. Amid such instability, Mr. Redbone found solace in music, particularly in obscure popular songs and blues from about 1880 to 1940.

"All I know is that I was introduced to this music very early on," he told the Daily Gazette of Schenectady/Albany in 2012, "and I'm pretty much the same person I was."

In Toronto, where he began performing in the late 1960s, Mr. Redbone led a secretive life. No one knew where he lived, and the only way to reach him, according to Pugh's article, was to call a billiards hall and leave a message for "Mr. Grunt."

As a musician and as a personality, he was entirely self-made. His virtuosity as a finger-picking guitarist, pianist and harmonica player seemed to materialize out of thin air. He adopted a languid, [drawling manner of speech](#) that was in place by his 20s.

In 1979, Mr. Redbone survived a plane crash in West Virginia in which two of his fellow passengers were killed. From then on, he was reluctant to travel by air and usually drove to his performances.

Although he was evasive about where he lived, Mr. Redbone settled in New Hope — and became a skilled stonemason and cook. He released his final studio album, "Flying By," in 2014 and retired from performing the next year. A two-disc compilation of early recordings, "Long Way From Home," was released in 2016.

In addition to Handler, his wife of 45 years, survivors include two daughters, Blake Redbone and Ashley Redbone; and three grandchildren.

A documentary about Mr. Redbone, ["Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone,"](#) premiered last year.

At the suggestion of ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov, choreographer Eliot Feld devised a suite of dances performed to Mr. Redbone's music.

"How Leon sings these songs gives them a world, a universe," Feld told the Los Angeles Times. "He's a tragic clown."

Mr. Redbone may have been reluctant to reveal much about his personal life, but he was eager to celebrate the all-but-forgotten music that inspired him.

"The only thing that interests me," he said, "is history, reviewing the past and making something out of it."

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